Symbolic Interactionism and Ethnomethodology

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Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, while apparently similar in topic and approach, are radically different sociological perspectives. Garfinkel's notion of a plenum is used to illustrate this difference with regard to their approaches to the concept of interaction. Ethnomethodology's rejection of the concepts of actor and context, and its different treatment of meaning, are contrasted with symbolic interactionism's terms of reference.
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Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology share sufficient features to make them recognizable as similar kinds of sociological perspective. Practitioners of both are suspicious of premature theorizing (Blumer 1969; Sharrock and Anderson 1982) and advocate the employment of no greater a theoretical apparatus than is required to allow investigations of the social world to take place. Both favor qualitative methods, particularly ethnographies, for undertaking such investigations (Becker and Geer 1957; Garfinkel 2002:248). Finally, both reject the idea that there can be an "objective" description of social interaction. For symbolic interactionists, the sense of interaction depends entirely on actors' interpretations and understandings (Blumer 1969:2), while for ethnomethodologists the meaning of any interactional "move" is reflexively tied to its context: action, sense, and situation are mutually elaborative in situ (Garfinkel 1967:3–4).

There are, however, significant differences between the two perspectives. Attempts at synthesis (e.g., Denzin 1970) are generally rebuffed (e.g., Zimmerman and Wieder 1970), and there is a sense of mutual incomprehension about what each perspective is meant to be doing (e.g., Hill and Crittenden 1968). The situation has not been improved by symbolic interactionist misreadings of ethnomethodological texts (e.g., Denzin 1990; Lynch and Bogen 1991) or ethnomethodological accusations that symbolic interactionists reify social institutions into "things" that "contain" social interaction (e.g., Coulter 1982). While some of these disputes have clarified just what

symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology are, they have done little to clarify how they differ and what is at stake in these differences. At the risk of caricaturing some very complex distinctions and disagreements, what is at stake is whether interactionist sociologies are *better ways of doing sociology* or *alternatives to sociology*. Symbolic interactionists, rightly, have argued that their perspective addresses glaring flaws in the conventional sociological approaches to research (see, especially, Blumer 1969:127–39). Ethnomethodologists, on the other hand, argue that their approach constitutes an "asymmetrical" and "alternate" sociology *tout court*: nothing is sacred, and even the most basic concepts of conventional sociology must be "respecified" (Garfinkel 2002:114–20).

The central argument of this short article is that symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology fundamentally differ on how to construe the nature of social interaction, what constitutes proper sociological description of its workings, and the implications of those differences for study policies and methodology. These differences are discussed by considering how symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists differ in their understandings of three key components of social interaction: meaning and relevance, the social actor, and context. Garfinkel's use of the concept of a plenum will be used as a perspicuous way to gather together these differences. In conclusion, the apparent similarities between the two perspectives, as outlined above, are shown to conceal radical discontinuities.

MEANING

The *meaningful* nature of social interaction is central to both symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. What this "meaning" consists in, however, differs radically between the two. For symbolic interactionism, meaning is the outcome of actors' interpretations of the settings (and constituent parts of those settings, including other actors) they are acting in. Thus Blumer (1969:2) argues, first, that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them," second, that "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows," and third, that "meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters." Meaning is thus something that is a *product of* social interaction, but requires active interpretation to be acted on.

An example of such interpretation can be found in Hughes's (1945) examination of how race and professional status may interact. In a more segregated social context, while doctors were of very high status—indeed, may have been incumbents in the highest professional status category—blacks were looked down on, discriminated against, and openly disparaged. A white patient encountering a black doctor, therefore, would face a dilemma: should a doctor be identified by his or her ethnicity, or should a black person be identified by his or her professional status and expertise? The doctor is a *bearer* of different possible identity interpretations, and the patient makes a selection from these possibilities in the course of the interaction.

The ethnomethodological alternative to this construal of meaning centers on concepts of relevance and temporal organization. Although a potentially infinite number of descriptors can be brought to bear on anything, including any person (Garfinkel 1967:28; Sacks 1963), for practical purposes only those that are relevant to the setting are. Minimally, through the use of membership categorization devices (Sacks 1972), activity-relevant categories are preferred. Thus, for example, in a medical encounter doctor and patient are the relevant categories for use *unless something makes the use of those categories problematic*. In such circumstances, the use of a selected category can be challenged—but if it is not, it will remain the relevant category for the purposes of parties to the setting for the time being. In this sense, temporal organization has a bearing on the matter: a setting-relevant category remains relevant unless something changes (e.g., a change of topic, the increasing relevance of other matters, etc.). A statement, for example, can be revealed to be a falsehood over the course of a cross-examination, but will be taken as evidence of fact if not subjected to such scrutiny (Lynch and Bogen 1997). In this sense, meaning truly derives from, or arises out of, interaction in ethnomethodological analysis: nothing is "brought in" from outside the interaction. As Bittner (1965), for example, points out, what rules apply in organizational decision making, and how those rules are to be interpreted, are matters for application by competent practitioners *on each occasion of their use*: there is no sense in which such rules "exist" or "apply" independently of their use.

Ethnomethodologists, then, agree with symbolic interactionists that meanings are generated in social interaction. Where they differ is in their insistence that those meanings are always contingent and subject to revision, correction, change, and replacement. Instead of focusing on *what* interpretations are made, then, ethnomethodologists emphasize the *ways* in which meaning is produced, recognized, and transformed during an interaction. This means that for ethnomethodologists, the fine detail of interactions—turn taking in conversation, for example (Sacks et al. 1974)—as they unfold must always be primary data. Video and audio recordings are typically privileged over field notes, and little use is made of post hoc recollections, interviews, focus groups, and the like, which could be used legitimately to capture "the actor's point of view" in symbolic interactionist studies. Indeed, ethnomethodologists construe "the actor" in a radically different way to symbolic interactionists, effectively rendering his or her "point of view" sociologically irrelevant.

THE SOCIAL ACTOR

The social actor is central to Blumer's account of symbolic interaction. The "human being" is a locus for a whole host of processes and attributions. He or she interprets situations and the elements within them, including the identities of other actors—just as his or her identity is interpreted by other actors in turn. Roles are thus taken, attributed, and aligned. Furthermore, collections of actors also play a role, both as categories and as reference groups—for example, "squares" in Becker's (1951) analysis of jazz musicians—and as the community as a whole or society at large, for example,

"the generalised other" in Mead 1934. Both other actors and social groups are "internalized," represented within the human actor, and actions are conducted with an orientation to these internalized representations. This internalization allows each actor to "take the role of the other," to imagine how things would look from the other person's viewpoint (or from the viewpoint of "people in general"), and thereby align his or her actions to the expected requirements and orientations of others.

Goffman (1952) provides an excellent example of how the concepts of self and other work themselves out in interaction. Goffman analyses how self-damaging news, such as losing a job or being left by a partner, is given. Such news, he argues, has effects greater than its practical ramifications: it alters how one sees oneself. The self-perceptions of being a valued employee or loved partner, for example, are also damaged. Such news, therefore, is typically given in such a way as to minimize the extent of this damage to the self. Reasons are given for the change of circumstances that minimize the extent to which the disappointed party can see himself or herself as being at fault, for example, by referring to forces beyond the employer's control or external pressures on the relationship. The person giving the bad news orientates to the disappointed party's sense of self, while the disappointed party orientates to how he or she might be seen by other people in general. By providing the capacity to see oneself in less-damaged terms, with regard to one's reference group, the situation can be managed and the possibility that things might get out of hand is reduced.

The ethnomethodological alternative to this approach ignores any putative "inner" states and indeed abandons the notion of the actor as the driving force in interaction: ethnomethodology focuses exclusively on interactional processes. The "internal" states, self-perceptions, motives, and concerns of the individual are *solely* products of the interactions he or she is a part of. As Sacks (1992:115) argues, "Don't worry about the brains that these persons couldn't have but which the objects [of conversation] seem to require. *Our task is, in this sense, to build their brains*" (my emphasis). Settings are self-organizing, and that organization *includes* the identities of the "actors" within them. Rather than the term *actor*, ethnomethodologists prefer *member*, defined as a "mastery of natural language" (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970:342): the locus of competent interaction. Instead of building interaction out from the actor, the member is construed as a product of the interaction. Thus, for instance, in therapeutic encounters the "symptoms" of a patient are rendered through the responses his or her utterances elicit:

> A: I keep getting these funny twitches.

> B: Jesus, A, every time something real comes up you try to change the subject.

> (Schwartz 1976:59)

CONTEXT

Symbolic interactionists understand particular interactions as taking place in particular contexts. These contexts can be lay or professional. Lay contexts are those that social actors themselves might orientate to, for instance, "the art world" for painters,

sculptors, musicians, curators, agents, and so on. Professional contexts are those determined by sociologists: by gathering together different kinds of interactions on the basis of their formal features, it is possible to classify them as particular "kinds" of interactions that can then be compared and contrasted with others. In both cases, ethnographic investigation facilitates a clear definition of what constitutes the context and how the particular interaction under investigation instantiates that context's features. Becker (1982:36), for instance, argues that sociologists can solve the problem of what constitutes art "more easily than art world participants" by virtue of their descriptions of how those participants make claims and counterclaims about this issue. Hughes (1951:320), on the other hand, points out the formal similarities between plumbers and doctors ("both practice esoteric techniques for the benefit of people in distress") and between prostitutes and psychiatrists ("both take care not to become too personally involved with clients who come to them with rather intimate problems").

Ethnomethodologists would consider the notion of context used by symbolic interactionists problematic in two ways. First, ethnomethodologists are suspicious of the use of vernacular terms as sociological concepts, particularly where sociologists claim to have "clarified" or "operationalized" those terms (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). Ethnomethodologists, for example, would not accept the notion of art being a "thing" capable of examination, but would seek to study how different members determine what does or does not constitute art in particular settings and contexts. The idea of these investigations being "added up" to show what art "really is" is alien to ethnomethodological analysis. Where "professional" or "formal" definitions are used, such as Hughes's concept of status, ethnomethodologists would point toward the vernacular derivation of such terms and the problematic relationship between their lay and professional uses. As Rose (1960) points out, there exists a natural, vernacular way to describe and classify social phenomena (the words *social* and *order* themselves had a perfectly good vernacular use centuries before Durkheim). As with the ethnomethodological understanding of meaning, the ways these descriptions and classifications are undertaken could be something to be investigated—but it is not the job of sociology to simply try to do them better, even if that were possible.

The ethnomethodological alternative to providing "context" for interaction is to treat it as an interactional accomplishment. Zimmerman and Pollner (1970:99) articulate this approach using the concept of the "occasioned corpus of setting features":

> The occasioned corpus is thus conceived to consist in members' methods of exhibiting the connectedness, objectivity, orderliness, and relevance of the features of any particular setting as features in, of, and linked with a more encompassing, ongoing setting, typically referred to as "the society." The work of the occasioned corpus is the work of displaying the society "in back of" the various situated appearances constituent of everyday, located scenes.

What constitutes relevant "contextual" features for an interaction, then, is worked out in the interaction itself. Anderson and colleagues (1987) illustrate this in their consideration of management negotiations. Both the "problem" (what needs to be decided on) and its "solution" (what line of action should be taken) are systematically

unclear at the beginning of the interaction. Both are clarified and elaborated over the course of the interaction and are used to clarify and elaborate one another. The reflexive constitution of problem, solution, and decisions are accomplishments of the interaction itself, not its "circumstances" or "rationale."

Garfinkel (1991) and other ethnomethodologists are suspicious of the notion of context, as it rarely provides for the accurate description of particular settings of interaction. Instead it renders particular interactions "instances of" broader sociological or lay categories. Premature generalization—seeking what in a particular circumstance makes it an example of a category of circumstances—is replaced with a concern for haecceity, the "just this-ness" of a phenomenon. What makes the particular the particular thing it is, is the central concern for ethnomethodological description, and—to the extent that "context" is invoked—its invocation is merely another interactional feature of the interaction itself.

CONCLUSION

Garfinkel (1991) invokes the concept of a plenum to illustrate some of the ways philosophy, sociology, and other disciplines justify their pretheoretical moves. For symbolic interactionists, the relevant plenum might be that of William James: "the blooming, buzzing confusion . . . needed to specify distinctive generic properties of perception and attention" (Garfinkel 1991:13). Without a sense of plentiful confusion, of unclassified "stuff," there can be little justification for setting out categories of experience meant to allow that stuff to be brought into analytic focus. Garfinkel's question is whether such a plenum is needed for sociology. His assertion is that ethnomethodology demonstrates that it is not, as it can find order and regularity in the stuff of unclassified interactions. The implications of this for symbolic interactionism are that its core vocabulary for examining interaction—actor, meaning, context—is an unnecessary imposition on real-worldly social phenomena.

In light of this, the apparent similarities between symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology outlined in the introduction can be seen to conceal real differences. Blumer's suspicion of premature theorizing is belied by his unnecessary invocation of "human being" and "interpretation." The symbolic interactionist use of ethnographies is designed to "capture" the interpretations actors make and the roles they exhibit and attribute to one another—for ethnomethodology ethnographies allow sociologists to capture the *details* of interactions alone (which is why the use of video or audio recordings is preferred for ethnomethodological analyses (e.g., Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010). The rejection of objectivity in symbolic interactionism is to better grasp "the actor's point of view," while in ethnomethodology it is justified by the notion that objectivity (where it seems to exist) is simply a product of the interaction under investigation—just like anything else. For ethnomethodologists, symbolic interactionism is a valid sociological perspective, but its claims to capture the "real" nature of social interaction are held back by its inability to *radically* reject its social-science presuppositions.

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